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THE WASHINGTON POST
4 February 1982

JFK Secretly Taped White House Talks

By Bob Woodward and Patrick E. Tyler
Washington Post Staff Writers

President John F. Kennedy secretly recorded about 600 of his White House meetings and telephone conversations during the last 16 months of his presidency—apparently without the knowledge of other participants.

It has been known for several years that Kennedy recorded some meetings and phone conversations from his White House days, but the extent of the recordings, the names of the participants and the subject matters have never been disclosed.

A 29-page log obtained by The Washington Post from the Kennedy Library in Boston shows the recordings were made from July, 1962, until November, 1963, the month Kennedy was assassinated. The tapes contain a vast amount of unreleased information, including many highly classified meetings of the National Security Council on such subjects as the Cuban missile crisis, Berlin and Vietnam, and high-level discussions of domestic controversies such as the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi.

There are recordings of 325 meetings in the Oval Office or the Cabinet room and another 275 personal telephone conversations Kennedy had with family members, his Cabinet, White House staff, former presidents, legislators, world leaders and diplomats.

The disclosure of a secret Oval Office taping system maintained by President Richard M. Nixon became a sensational element in the Watergate scandal. Those tapes eventually provided evidence for the impeachment proceedings that led to Nixon's resignation in 1974. At least two other presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, also taped private conversations in the White House, but the full scope of JFK's taping system has not been widely known.

"It is bound to become the primary source on how John F. Kennedy's mind worked," said Dan H. Fenn Jr., director of the Kennedy Library.

and preliminary transcripts, made by archivists over the last several years, are kept. The Washington Post has over the last several years requested access to the tapes but it has been denied because of classification and privacy considerations. Fenn said that some of the tapes and transcripts of the recordings, donated to the library by the Kennedy family in 1976, will be made available in the near future. Burke Marshall, a former assistant attorney general in the Kennedy administration and head of a three-member committee that controls release of material from the Kennedy Library, said last night: "Our position is going to be that we should open this material in an orderly fashion."

He said he could not set a time frame for this process, but added that transcripts are being made and that many will have to undergo a declassification review by the National Security Council.

Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's personal White House secretary, and several Secret Service agents who installed and maintained the system of recordings were the only ones who knew the full details of the secret recording system, according to well-informed officials.

"I was the engineer," Lincoln said in a recent interview. Lincoln said Kennedy had a switch in his office that activated a red light at her desk. That was the signal, she said, to begin the recording system. According to Lincoln, if the red light went on when Kennedy was on the phone, she was to record the conversation on the dictabelt system hooked into his phone. If the light went on when he was in the Oval office or the Cabinet room, she was to start the regular taping

system for those rooms. The log from the Kennedy Library indicates there may also have been some recordings made in a study in the president's residence. But one person knowledgeable about the taping system said he believed there was such a system but no actual recordings were made of Kennedy's conversations there.

"He was very conscious of history," Lincoln said. "He was always wanting to get exactly what was said... to pinpoint precisely what was said. These were for history, and he wanted to have them for that and he never once went back and listened to one."

Theodore C. Sorensen, special counsel to Kennedy and probably his closest aide, was shown a copy of the log last month. "I'm dumbfounded," Sorensen said, adding that he had no idea whatsoever that such recordings were being made.

The log listing each recording reads like a Who's Who of the early 1960s. It includes recordings made between Kennedy and the following: his wife Jacqueline Kennedy; his brothers Robert F. Kennedy and Edward M. Kennedy; former presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman; his vice president, Johnson; Sens. Barry Goldwater, Hubert H. Humphrey, Henry M. Jackson and J. William Fulbright; Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, House Speaker John W. McCormack, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, CIA Director John A. McCone; various military leaders, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor and Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

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Like presidents who came after him, Kennedy discussed the "use of polygraphs in tracing defense leaks" with his defense secretary, according to one log entry, and he appeared concerned about "keeping the CIA out of the Peace Corps," according to another.

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